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Is Libya's Qaddafi threatening student opponents in US?

By Frederic A. Moritz

Staff correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

When it comes to rumors of secret plots and assassination schemes, Libya's leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi is no stranger in the news.

The controversies surrounding his name have moved far beyond North Africa to colleges and university campuses in the United States — as well as in Western Europe and wherever else Libyan students study.

The reason: continued strife between students who support Colonel Qaddafi and others who oppose his 14-year-old rule.

Possible danger to anti-Qaddafi students has been highlighted by a warning from the London-based human rights group Amnesty International. It told of a threat issued Feb. 17 by the General People's Congress held in Tripoli, Libya.

According to Amnesty, this declared: "Every citizen is responsible for the liquidation of the enemies of the people and revolution." Libyans abroad who were classified "hostile" and failed to repent would be "pursued by all the sons of the Libyan people with all available means" and would be liquidated, according to the announced decision.

Amnesty notes that within months of a similar decision in 1980, 11 Libyans living abroad were assassinated, and attempts were made on the lives of four others.

The order could affect opponents of Qaddafi in Western Europe, as well as in the US. But an analyst notes that Qaddafi's main target may be his opponents in Sudan, which is perhaps the most important bastion of Qaddafi opponents.

There are some 3,000 Libyan students in the US. Many of them are studying agriculture, business, architecture, engineering, and education.

The majority are pro-Qaddafi, according to an academic who has studied the matter. In the last two years more and more incoming students, many of whom are sponsored by the government, have been pro-Qaddafi, so that opponents are increasingly a minority. Some opponents of Qaddafi are free from retaliation overseas because their parents back home are influential Qaddafi backers, an expert notes.

Frictions between the US and Libya have risen, including late 1981 US government warnings that President Reagan was on a Qaddafi "hit list." The US has stepped up enforcement of a ruling barring Libyan students from such security-related areas as aviation maintenance and nuclear studies.

A State Department official says this prohibition was already being applied in issuing of new visas. But, as a result of a measure announced March 18, it will now "affect those currently here." An expected result: Libyan students will gradually tend to study elsewhere.

All this has turned up the tension in a shadowy world of infighting that has spilled over into demonstrations, open violence, and the courts.

In May 1981 diplomats at the Libyan Embassy in Washington, D.C., were forced to go home in part because of allegations they were harassing anti-Qaddafi Libyan students. By the end of the year a semi-official group called the People's Committee for Students of Libyan-Arab Jamahiriya had set up an office in McLean, Va., justified partly for the purpose of processing scholarship payments to students.



Qaddafi: students a target?

In December 1982, 12 anti-Qaddafi Libyan students briefly seized the office and destroyed documents, arguing the office was being used to promote terrorism against Libyans in the US. A court sentenced them to a year in jail.

Asked whether a "liquidation" order had been issued for Qaddafi opponents in the US, Abulghasem Khumage, a member of the committee running the office and an education student at Ohio State University, told The Christian Science Monitor: "A society has the right to defend itself against enemies whoever and wherever they are. If the enemy is outside, he can be punished while absent, but agreements must be respected according to international law."

A Monitor check of several US universities with Libyan students revealed some nervousness and caution about the matter — but no reports of violence that might have resulted from the February decision cited by Amnesty.

An adviser of foreign students at Boston's Northeastern University refused to comment except to say: "We get nervous when the press asks these questions. Libyan students are in a threatening situation — whether it is the hitters going after the hitted, or the hitted going after the hitters. We do not want to say anything that helps anyone who is looking for these students."

At the University of Colorado, Denver, a counselor said, "So far we have had no specific request for more security. We watch the situation, but so far we have not had to ask for stepped-up security as we did a year and a half ago."

Tension rose following the October 1980 shooting of a Libyan critic of Qaddafi, Faisal Zagallai, a graduate student at Colorado State University at Fort Collins.

In January 1982 Eugene A. Tafoya, a former Green Beret, was convicted on two misdemeanor assault charges after he pleaded self-defense in shooting Mr. Zagallai twice in the head. Tafoya claimed he believed he was working at the direction of the CIA when he followed instructions, contained in an unmarked envelope, that told him to visit Zagallai and persuade him to tone down his anti-Qaddafi talk.

Prosecutors challenged his self-defense plea. They argued Tafoya had been hired on behalf of the Libyan government in an assassination plot orchestrated by Edwin P. Wilson, a former CIA officer in Libya, who has been convicted of violating US export laws by conspiring to smuggle handguns and an automatic rifle to Libyan agents in Europe and North Africa.